

# CHIVALRY OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

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"THE Age of Chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists and calculators has succeeded, and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever." Thus wrote Edmund Burke, something more than half a century ago.

The Age of Chivalry is indeed gone, that long, dark age, which few stars illumined, and those few the stars of a winter sky, which tell of a Heaven above, but warm not the freezing wanderer below. The age of eternal broil and battle, and bloodshed—the age of iron-cased men, and braying trumpets, and clashing steel—the age that saw three-fourths of the national masses in brutish serfdom, holding substance, limb and life at the mercy of feudal superiors—is in truth gone, and gone, we trust, forever. But the *spirit* of chivalry—that spirit which could shed a magical beauty on what was else so repulsive, is *not* extinguished. It *cannot* die, but with that human soul in which it germinates, and that Christianity which is its natural nurse and guardian. True it is, it has put away the warrior form, and warrior weapons that matched an iron age. But *itself* is surviving yet, and, in perpetual metempsychosis, animates other shapes, and works deeds akin to those immortal achievements of old.

The *spirit* of chivalry, we repeat, still lives. But what *is* this spirit? And what *was* the spirit actuating that chivalrous institution, which so impressed itself on the interval between the 11th and the 15th centuries? It was simply, and neither more nor less than, the spirit or principle of humanity, philanthropy, benevolence—a principle prompting the protection of the weak, the vindication of the wronged, the defence of the helpless, which were sworn obligations of the knightly order, on the sole ground that the *need* of such services made out a sufficient *title* to them. In a word, it was the second of the two great Christian laws—"love of the neighbor"—put in active exercise and taking such outward form, and such instruments as befitted that peculiar age.

Not, indeed, that humanity—a large humanity—has belonged *exclusively* to any period. In every time *individuals* have appeared embodying an *unusual* share of that compassionate sympathy, which is never perhaps totally extinct in any heart. To remove or mitigate existing evils, is with such a passion and a pursuit. Their deeds are embalmed in tradition and fable, and so live on from age to age. Thus it is, that Hercules, the destroyer of monstrous beast and cruel tyrant—Orpheus, the tamer of rock and tree, and savage animal—and Minos, the more than mortal-wise, and impartial minister of law and justice—have come down to us, as representatives of the world's early benefactors.

But it was *peculiar* to Christianity, to exalt benevolence from a simple *sentiment* or *impulse*, to the rank of a *duty*, and make its culture and exercise an imperative and universal obligation. The chivalry of the 11th century was an embodiment of this Christian principle. Its exterior organization, and the means and methods it adopted, were the product of the times.

The times, as every one knows, were peculiar. The rude Northern tribes had overthrown the debilitated Roman power, and the consequent intermingling of decrepit civilization, and vigorous barbarism, had anew brought "chaos and old night,"

"Where hot, cold, moist, and dry, those champions fierce  
Aye strove for mastery, and to battle brought  
Their embryon atoms."

Christianity was the only power wielding any *general* influence over these jarring social elements, and even *its* influence was very feeble and intermittent. Too often *brute force* overmatched all powers beside, and bloodshed, and violence, weakness trodden down, innocence despoiled, and right laughed to scorn, put a dreary aspect on the world's condition. The humanity of some finer spirits was strongly moved at the view. They naturally combined, and so grew stronger, and more zealous for their enterprise. The church, by timely interposition, prevented the dying away of this spontaneous impulse, and transformed it into settled principle and habit. And so it came to pass, that chivalry stood forth as Christian benevolence, steel-clad and furnished for conflict, bending against the champions of wrong their own weapons, and sworn to a war of extermination against the powers of darkness. Its mission, like that of the Hebrew host led by Moses, was the rescue, from a godless race, of a fair heritage usurped and defiled, and its banner, like theirs, was inscribed with the name of the "God of Battle." Like all human institutions, *this* must be admitted to have had no small admixture of error and evil. But it must equally be admitted to have wrought a good and very important work.

With the lapse of time, however, came time's customary changes. The revival, and more general diffusion of learning—the invention of printing, of gunpowder, and the mariner's compass, the discovery of a new continent in the west, and of a passage around the "Stormy Cape" in the east—were causes working powerfully toward civilizing the nations by giving a peaceful direction, as well as ample occupation, to the restless, conflicting energies of society. The scattered, wandering lights of chivalry gathered themselves into central stationary orbs. The principles of humanity and justice, guarded so long—and not unfaithfully, or ineffectually—by a small living order, became em-

bodied in systems of civil polity and law, upheld by the force, physical and moral, of nations. The shield to protect, and the sword to punish, were transferred to the state, and the institution of chivalry became a fair memory of the past.

"The knights' bones are dust,  
And their good swords are rust,  
Their souls are with the saints, we trust."

It is not, however, the disappearance of the *knighly order*, that Mr. Burke laments. He mourns the supposed extinction of *chivalrous sentiments* and modes of thinking. Is he correct in this supposition? Without wasting words on unimportant matters, let us briefly examine two or three essential points.

The condition of woman, for example, is supposed to have been materially elevated by chivalry, and the comparative state of the sex in the east and the west is appealed to as evidence. On this point we think there has prevailed much exaggeration, and no slight misapprehension of *causes*. We hold that not chivalry exclusively or mainly, but Christianity generally, was the author of woman's redemption. By dethroning brute *strength*, and assigning to moral power the rightful sovereignty of the world, it removed the sole bar to a virtual equality of the sexes. The very errors (if errors they were) pertaining to the predominant religion contributed to the same result. If through woman came the *fall* of man, through woman came also his *restoration*, and the mother of the world's Redeemer was raised to universal veneration and worship. From this her exaltation, a *reflected* light was shed on her whole sex, and an humble mother's smiles over the cradle, and her tears by the sepulchre of her child were a mighty instrument in striking the chains from half our race. Principles and sentiments like these, concerning woman, chivalry found already existing, and did but give them distincter form, and carry them more palpably into effect. For this service it should receive all merited commendation.

But has woman *in fact* lost in station, with the passing away of the chivalrous age? So far from it, the sex at large has immeasurably *gained* in estimation. Save through her own dereliction, a woman cannot be wronged in our time without the whole community being banded in her behalf, and this, too, with no special reference to her social position. Whereas, in the Middle Age the wife or daughter of the serf was far less likely to wake the zealous sympathy even of the *truest* knight, than the lady of baronial rank. Moreover, even the loveliest of the sex were not so much companions and friends of man, as cynosures of the imagination, and idols of exaggerated homage. A noble-minded, high-hearted woman *now* stands incalculably higher, and wields an immeasurably larger influence, than in any foregone time. As wife, she is companion, counsellor, and truest friend, making for her husband life's rough places plain, its burdens tolerable, and its dark passages bright—as mother, she may all but absolutely pronounce what the coming age shall be—as arbiter of manners, fashions, and social proprieties, who can measure her agency in moulding that public opinion, which in our day is more despotic than ever the word of king or kaiser of old?

As touching love, (which, as all know, was a paramount sentiment of chivalrous times,) love, that not very *dangerous*, though considerably *distressing* malady, which appears from history to have been endemic to every people of every zone, and which sets at nought even the most improved medical science—the symptoms, we believe, continue the same substantially as laid down in the Pathology of old Froissart. "The course of true love" runs not more "smooth" or less frothy than of old. "Nods and becks and wreathed smiles" are by the best judges pronounced as *infectious* as ever. And most certain is it, that in "woful ballads to a mistress' eyebrow," and so on, our age may fairly challenge competition with Richard the lion-hearted's own, nor did troubadours and minnesingers "startle night's ear" with strains more *cruelly* touching than are *executed* by bards of our day. A lady's "no" means "yes," precisely as it did in the time of St. Louis, and now, as of yore, the maiden who builds a "temple to friendship" is very apt to install love as the presiding divinity. We have, indeed, no *cours d'amour* to settle judicially, as in the days of Burgundian Philip the Good, such important questions as, "Should you rather see me *leave* your mistress as you *approach*, or *approach* as you retire?" But they are settled, nevertheless. If John Lobieski, king and hero as he was, more dreaded the one little weapon wielded by his lady spouse, than the whole leveled lances of "Mahound and Termagaunt," we apprehend our age is heroic enough to match him even here.

All things considered, then, we think it a fair conclusion, that as touching her condition and estimation woman has no cause to lament that "the age of chivalry is gone."

But how stands our time as regards that adventurous, all-hazarding humanity which in theory was an essential of the old chivalrous spirit? Surely our age, in *this* respect, need fear no comparison with the 11th or the 14th centuries. There is no evil afflicting mankind, however deep-rooted or appalling, which does not *now*, as promptly as *then*, band together a host of generous hearts for its extermination. We might cite in abundance modern examples even of that *military* daring and achievement, which chivalry prized so dearly, and examples, too, worthy *its* brightest days. But a distinction of our age, still more glorious, is that high-toned, enthusiastic courage, which "wrestles" not with flesh and blood, but "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

For example, what *knighly* enterprise of old, in disinterested benevolence, and even boldness, outshines that of the modern missionary to a barbarous people? To break asunder the ties of home, and kindred, and country—to surrender all the prerogatives of civilization and refinement—and without the "pomp, pride, and circumstance" of war inflaming the senses, or dreams of glory dazzling the imagination, to wage a wearisome, life-long conflict with ignorance and vice in all their repulsive varieties—here is exhibited a spectacle, which no feats of arms, however brilliant,

can parallel. It was, in truth, a noble impulse that urged the crusading hosts to the rescue of their Christian brethren in Palestine from Saracen oppression. But, then, from those *brethren*, at least, they might reckon on sympathy and cordial welcome. Whereas, the missionary toils for those who regard him, at best, a *stranger*, and sometimes an enemy. He must brave the arousing of that most pitiless of human passions, *religious hate*. He must often "do his devoir," not in the presence of applauding *peers*, but of covert ill-wishers, or open scorners. With his sweat and tears, and may be his blood, he must moisten a soil which, after all, may not show a single green blade in requital of his toils. Amid all sacrifices, privations, obstacles, and discouragements—in perpetual jeopardy of falling unpitied and unsung—*this* soldier of the cross must fight through his long battle-day, content if he hear not the inspiring shouts of men, but the low whispers of approving conscience.

In a word, the modern chivalry is of far wider scope and loftier aim, than the ancient. It essays the redemption of men from *spiritual* as well as *physical* evils. It would strike the fetters from the mind and heart, not less than from the limbs. It compassionates such as have no pity for themselves, and would save those who are bent on their own destruction. And many, and most glorious in these days, have been the trophies of its achievements. Intemperance itself—that foul, prodigious birth to which the world, despairing of resistance, had so long submitted to yield an annual sacrifice, often of its brightest and hopefulest—has found at last a second Theseus to attempt its mastery, and the destruction of the monster is matter of cheering hope. And madness—that fearfully mysterious thing, before which, as it were an incarnate fiend, other times have quailed in helpless awe—has by modern benevolence been looked steadily in the eye and *tamed*. The dungeons and chains, which inflicted on *calamity* the pains of *crime*, have disappeared, and simple kindness, while found the best of *cures*, has also been found a more effectual *restraint* than all such.

Nor have the victims of crime been overlooked. No longer like the lepers of old, are they shut out from all contact with *society*, and abandoned, as beyond recovery, to die without intervention on their behalf. It was remembered that a condemned malefactor rendered homage to the Son of God, while the leaders and honorable ones of the people flouted and murdered him—that to *him* was Paradise opened, while over the self-complacent ones, who decreed and witnessed his fate, a doom was impending so horrible as to draw tears from the guiltless victim of their barbarity. That most illustrious of all chivalrous banners—the banner of Howard, the Godfrey of the crusade for redeeming the *outcast*—has gathered about it a host of congenial spirits, and many a prison *now*, like that of Paul and Silas, echoes with triumphant hymns of praise—the hymns of those "born into the glorious *liberty* of the sons of God."

Nor is there a nook or covert so obscure, which the blessed light of this spirit does not penetrate. From the sordid garrets and cellars where crouches poverty

—*vicious* poverty perhaps—issues the cry of hunger, and cold, and sickness. And why do fortune's *favoured* ones—they who clothe and lodge warmly—they whose hearts are light, and whose frames buoyant with health—why do *such* pause and turn aside at this cry? They are moved by the spirit of humanity of the modern *chivalry*. And so moved, you behold men—aye, and women too—the very minions of worldly prosperity—climbing the dark staircase, or plunging into the squalid cellar, bearing the wholesome food, the nourishing drink, the comfortable garment, and, best of all, carrying the balm of kind words and looks to the worn and desolate of heart.

And from the far isles of the sea is wafted the faint moan of a people stricken with famine. That faint moan is heard above all the din of business and clashing personal interests, and the whole community is agitated thereby. Behold the munificence of the rich, the mite of the poor, and even the tribute of the self-indulgent, pouring like a flood into a common treasury! Behold ships freighted, and their canvas all spread *eagerly* to the winds, to bear relief to those who are alien in blood and strangers even in name!

Knowledge, too, has its errant knights, not less distinguished than those of old for love of adventure and the readiness to dare all peril for its gratification. The diary of the modern traveller often equals, in romantic interest, the fictitious narrations of the exploits of the round table, and the paladins of Charlemagne. Park, and Clapperton, and Bruce, Humbolt, Burckhardt, and Caillé, Parry and Ross, and Franklin, are in daring and fortitude as genuine examples of chivalry, as the fabled Amadis and Roland, Huon, Bordelais, and Arthur Pendragon. To cross difficult mountains, and unfamiliar torrent-streams, to traverse unexplored forests and burning Zaharas; to risk the encounter of beast and reptile, and savage men still fiercer and more dangerous than these, demands a combination of that adventurous enthusiasm and unflinching hardihood, which made the very essence of knight-errantry. The *fabulous* champion was furnished for his conflict with giant and dragon, with weapons and harness forged by superhuman art. *Our* champions go fearlessly forth with no resources save those lying in their own resolute will and indomitable patience. The crusading knights brought back from the east some contributions to the civilization of the west. This, however, made no part of their original plan, but was merely a *casual* result of their enterprise. But of *our* crusades it is a *distinctive*, and often the *sole* aim to redeem the world's waste places to the dominion of enlightened man—to enlarge the boundaries of truth and science—to connect distant regions by that mutual acquaintance and interchange, from which each shall reap solid advantages.

The "Incidents of Travel," by a cotemporary countryman of our own, were of itself evidence enough, that the old adventurous spirit is not extinct. From the chosen land of "economists and calculators" has issued one, who, outwardly stamped with the unmistakable signature of the nineteenth century, and of Puritanic Yankee land as well, yet shows himself as

completely possessed with the genius of errantry, as ever was ancient knight to whom

"*Danger's self* was lure alone."

The droll good humor he carries with him alike through the wilds of the ancient Scythian, and the decayed Homestalls of Ham and Esau—the self-relying composure with which he pic-nics with the robbersons of Ishmael and occasionally defies them to their beard—are a flight above St. Dennis and St. George. The interest, too, attracted to his narrations so widely and instantly, shows plainly that, notwithstanding all declarations to the contrary, to "dicker" and to "swap" are not all that Brother Jonathan cares for.

But as a crowning disproof of the imputation cast on the chivalry of our time, we may instance the *Democratic spirit* which pervades it so widely, and which is fast growing to universal predominance. No one will suppose we mean, by Democracy, what often usurps the name. We mean not *that* Florimel of the poet, who was as *false* as *fair*, and whose harlotry was manifest from her vain attempts to clasp on the consecrated girdle. We mean the Florimel, alike lovely and *true*, on whose bosom shines the well-fitting cestus wrought by art divine—that cestus, emblem of order and wholesome law, which wakes in the beholder a love alike permanent and chaste. It is the spirit prompting to "undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free," and to break every yoke from all wearing the shape of man.

However, incomplete the prevalence of this spirit even now, however many the oppressions and glaring the inequalities yet existing in fact, it cannot be denied that there lies at the heart of this age, struggling incessantly for fuller and clearer manifestation, the idea that all men are in *essentials* originally equal, having a valid claim to all the means and opportunities needful for such a development of their capacities, as shall make life a *blessing* instead of a *burden*, and every child of Adam a *man* and not a *beast*.

Now the age capable of entertaining and cherishing an idea so large and glorious as this, need not, even were this its *sole* distinction, shrink from comparison with *any* age foregone. Originally promulgated by Christ in an abstract form, the world was not *then* ready to embody it in political institutions, or in fact to *apprehend* it, save very partially. And what age, until our own, has been fitted to receive and endeavor to realize it? Certainly not the "Age of Chivalry." The knight was level with the thought of purging the land, hallowed by the Redeemer's footsteps, of those who *denied* that Redeemer, and of unriveting from those who, with themselves, rallied under the venerated emblem of the cross, the fetters imposed by such as flouted and trampled on the cross. And *this* was much. But the conception of breaking the bands of villenage—of elevating to the dignity of *men* and *equals* the immense masses of serfs that encompassed him—was utterly above his measure.

Moreover, an outrage perpetrated within the bounds of his domain—for example, a lady, or even an itinerant merchant, robbed and shut up to ransom in the stronghold of some neighboring marauder—summoned him not in vain to punish the wrong and deliver the

captive. But that whole races, under the very shadow of his pennon, should wear out life in the prisoning stronghold of ignorance, subject not merely to the reasonable commands, but to the *wildest caprices* of masters who were such by no title save that of the *gauntleted hand*, never seems to have struck him as a wrong calling for his interposition, or even his compassion.

From this *partial* character of chivalry many an evil has come down to our time, imperatively needing reform and yet exceeding difficult to be reached. It has left a stigma on labor—that which always *has* engaged and always *must* engage the majority of men. Nor does the task promise to be easy of redeeming the very employments indispensable to man's existence from the brand of *vulgarism* left upon them by the chivalrous past, and of vindicating for useful industry a superiority of regard above unproductive idleness or even activity in the work of destruction.

To sum up our parallel. The elder chivalry commencing with the redress of individual wrongs and grievances nigh at hand, reached its culmination in a grand, combined enterprise to deliver from oppression a province and a people. The modern chivalry musters its forces to extirpate evil, *wherever* and *however* it appears, and to redeem *all* lands and the *whole* race from every bond, whether restricting their freedom, their dignity, or their general well-being:

And *this* chivalry, we may confidently hope, will not, like its predecessor, die out with the times that gave it birth, but will endure while man and earth endure. And not *endure* only, but go on from triumph to triumph, and glory to glory, till it "hath put all enemies under its feet." The day of *physical* battle and carnage would seem to be nearly gone by, to return, let us hope, no more. Let us hope that the noblest genius and the most transcendent powers are no longer, as heretofore, to be desecrated to the service of the war-demon, and their whole efficiency put forth in the work of destruction, nor the lyre, the pencil, and the pen, to lavish their marvelous skill in garnishing with beauty and splendor the *intrinsic* ugliness of bloodshed and devastation.

"Peace hath its victories  
No less than war,"—

sang the poet three centuries ago, and the hour is coming, and now is, for prizing *these* victories aright. Thrice happy we that ours is a time when the sceptre is passing from iron nerves and mere *axial* vigor and hardihood, to those higher qualities, which act serenely and in silence—that the noiseless sunshine and soft-falling dews, and not the crashing thunder-peal and the watery deluge, are the proper symbols of the "powers that be,"—that now the warrior *literally* goes out to battle guarded and weaponed, as described by one of the earliest, as most eminent of their line, "putting on the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation," and grasping in his hand the "sword of the spirit."

And to what glorious *results* does the warrior, so armed, go forth to battle? How often has the obscure *man*—yea, and *woman*—clothed solely with this *moral* force, stricken a blow before which the

world's foundations have shaken! How often, at the voice of such an one, have the wrong-doer's knees been loosened and his blood stood still, in the very centre of his guarded citadel! And how often, in our day, have they, of whom the world's great ones make no account, achieved by *this* instrumentality what philosophers and even sceptred monarchs might envy—returned, for example, the light of joy in a hundred homes, long shrouded in black midnight, and hidden a hundred dwellings, in lieu of jangling broil or anguished sob and wail, peal out harmonious songs of thanksgiving and gladness! The old prophetic word is fulfilling. "He hath chosen the *weak things* of the world to confound the things that are mighty."

Such being the fact, is it without *warrant* that we turn with high anticipations to the future? Is it mere *fancy*, the thought that we, *even now*, are standing in the glimmering dawn of a brighter than any foregone earthly day?—such an one as "kings and prophets desired to see, but died without the sight." Is not a time drawing nigh, which shall verify the *sanity* of those higher and purer aspirations, which have always flamed up amid the darkness of man's troubled soul? May we not now *rationaly* indulge the thought, that this magnificent platform of earth, canopied by yon majestic silver-gushing sky, is fitted for the exhibition of something richer and nobler than the hitherto paltry, prosaic life of man? What *means* the poet's magic inspiration, the plastic power of the sculptor and painter, whereby they bring before us scenes brighter and lovelier than mortal eye ever witnessed, and human beings majestic and admirable as very gods? Is this our unquenchable yearning after higher and better than *present* existences, a mere *disease* of the

soul, making of man a Tantalus burning with an everlasting thirst?

We cannot so think. We *must* believe that the most gorgeous dream of the poet, the most splendid conception of the artist, the most exquisitely beautiful scene the romancer ever drew, are after all but the shadowing of absolute truth—truth, possible too, to man's attaining, and his attaining in this *present stage* of being. We are buried, and smothered, and blinded by evils of our own, and our fathers' creating, and so catch hardly a glimpse of the glorious possibilities wooing us on every side, and waiting only to be clutched.

But, as we said, our hope is, that these dark, wearisome days are passing away, that from the moral forces now in such triumphant operation, the time is drawing on which shall join man's ideal and actual in everlasting marriage—when the tradition of a golden age, universally and perpetually existing, shall become *living fact*—when the gates of the once foreit Eden shall be unbarred, and man's sinning, sorrowing, yearning, passionate heart shall enter into its rest! The words by which Holy Writ pictures forth that coming day, are too familiar to need quoting. Not *so* familiar, perhaps, are the strains in which the heathen poet thus nobly sang of it:—

"The last great Age, foretold by sacred rhymes,  
Renews its finished course; Saturnian times  
Roll round again, and mighty years begun  
From this first orb, in radiant circles run,  
Unlabored harvests shall the fields adorn,  
And clustered grapes shall blush on every thorn;  
No keel shall cut the wave for *foreign* ware,  
For every soil shall every product bear.  
The laboring hind his oxen shall disjoin,  
No plow shall hurt the glebe, no pruning hook the  
vine."